

Masculinity and Men's Power in Nepal's Context

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Abstract

This paper explores the persistence of hegemonic masculinity in Nepal, a patriarchal society where gender roles are entrenched in social, professional, and domestic spheres. It examines how male dominance is perpetuated in fields like engineering, where female professionals face barriers due to gendered norms, and in media and politics, where men are portrayed as symbols of power. Domestic violence is also analyzed as a means of asserting masculinity within households. Despite growing awareness and efforts to challenge these norms, hegemonic masculinity remains deeply embedded in Nepal's culture, requiring sustained efforts toward gender equality and transformative change.

Keywords: hegemony, masculinity, gender, patriarchy, awareness

Introduction

As soon as a child is born, the child is given either of the sex identity: boy or girl. After that, society imposes different gender roles. What is good for boys and what is bad for girls. Growing children have to follow fixed social norms and expectations. The term “masculinity” refers to the roles, behaviours, and attributes that are associated with maleness and considered appropriate for men. Similarly, the term “femininity” refers to a society's ideas about the roles, behaviours, and attributes that are considered appropriate to women and associated with femaleness. Colonialism paved the way for the concept of masculinities by dividing gender roles because “when European women went to the colonies, it was mainly as wives and servants within households controlled by men” (Adams and Savran 246). We deal with these social ideas about masculinity and femininity every day. Though the very idea of masculinity dates back to around the 16th century, different types of masculinities have emerged and since then masculinity has been redefined due to political awareness. Although “new patterns of hegemony” have come into existence due to “transnational corporations, media, and security system” (Connell and Messerschmidt 854), this paper will present arguments and evidence to substantiate the prevalence of the extent of hegemonic masculinities in the department of irrigation, advertisements, and families in the context of Nepal.

Before I start examining the existing practices of hegemonic masculinities, I would like to provide background information on Nepal. Nepal is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual South Asian nation. It is a landlocked country; however, the beautiful part is that “the country can be divided into three main geographical regions: Himalayan region, mid hill region and the Terai region” (“Geography” para 1). Being one of the least developed countries, “about 25.2 per cent of the population live below poverty line” and “literacy rate for the year 2011 is 65.9 per cent” in Nepal (Central Bureau of Statistics, Statistical Year Book of Nepal 2019 xiv). Only 65.9 per cent of the total population is literate. Around 75 per cent of the population is expected to be engaged in agriculture. Patriarchal ideology is deeply rooted in Nepalese societies. So, patriarchy has further reinforced the essence and idea of hegemonic masculinities in Nepal.

In many parts of the world, men are dominant in different sectors like politics, economics, and family. Genuine gender equality is still a utopian idea. However, it does not mean that all men are powerful. But the fact “that having power over political, economic and social affairs is associated with masculinity. The roles, behaviours, and attributes that are associated with maleness and considered masculine usually bring greater social status, economic reward, and political power than those associated with the feminine. Even though more and more women are taking on leadership roles in many walks of life, from government to private companies, the norm remains that leadership is seen as masculine and done by men—authority still has a male face” (UN WOMEN 13). There are several Nepali women who have gone into politics or promoted to senior positions in business, but they are often stigmatized for not showing womanly characteristics, or being too manly. Since women in these roles might be seen as challenging men or contending against men for positions, they often face harassment and abuse from men, who are attempting to reinforce their own power and control.

Hegemony in Engineering

In engineering, in the Department of Irrigation (DOI), professional performance is gendered and normalized as ‘masculine’. Masculine performance is located in intersections of gender, caste, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. deter female engineers from performing as a ‘normal’ engineer in Nepal. Male engineers feel superior to female counterparts because fieldwork is essential in the DOI. Male engineers believe that field work is difficult for women to overcome dangerous geographical hurdles and technical issues. An interviewee (male engineer) recounted his “experience of the masculine self, working with structures and technicalities in engineering” (Liebrand and Udas 6). Contrarily, for women, fieldwork is associated with difficulties. They need to spend several days out of their house. “When female engineers are expected to perform as ladies and lady engineers—not as engineers” (6). As female engineers are compelled to believe that such “masculine behaviour tend” to tarnish their family reputation. Therefore, female engineers’ “career prospects in the DOI will remain grim for some time. The association between men, masculinity, and engineering in Nepal is a historical construct” (16 – 17). These thoughts and practices still exist to some extent.

Hegemony in Posters

Advertisement is very common in the contemporary society. Many do not feel that its “effect is beyond the normally considered province of economic transaction of the market” (Mishra 1). Advertisements can affect our values and perception of something. Some Nepalese advertisements and posters represent hegemonic masculinity, which many people may not be aware of. “The advertisement attempts to construct the “hegemonic masculinity” as the study of “hegemonic masculinity aims normally at identification of those sorts of men who enjoy power and wealth” (MacKinnon 8).



Fig. 1. Maaruti Cement Advertisement in Nepal

The westernized attire of the popular male actors unlike simple clothes of the two female actors, dominating number of male actors, and the central position of Rajesh Hamal suggest that these men are successful and wealthy. This also teaches wrongly that the most powerful person (a man) is always positioned in the centre. The notable point here is Rajesh Hamal facing the camera direct and only his both arms are visible. Moreover, his loud, bold and authoritative voice project him as a “hegemonic masculine” man.



Fig. 2. Political Party Poster (Nepali Congress)

The absence of female politicians indicates the symbolic annihilation of women from the political arena. This further strengthens the idea of hegemonic masculinity. Women cannot be involved in politics. The term ‘politics’ can have connotations of power, leadership, control, etc. This will undermine the confidence of women and create the illusion of women’s incapability in politics. Serious facial expressions, photos of old politicians, glasses, black hats, serious looks, etc. constitute the main characteristics for politics, power, and control in Nepalese societies. In other words, no women are capable of becoming like one of these politicians. Kumar elucidates this point very succinctly by stating, “I take women to be the most disadvantaged group in the Nepali political process, as they constitute over 50 per cent of the total population in the country and yet their representation is nowhere near comparable to that of men,” (38).

Hegemony and Patriarchy

As I have already provided Nepal’s background briefly, I would like to present more examples of how “hegemonic masculinity” has become indispensable in the patriarchal societies. Patriarchy is the outcome of the past which we cannot easily get rid of. That’s why “the domination of men and the subordination of women constitute a historical process, not a self-reproducing system” (Connell 844). Some men still accept that “deep-rooted, male-controlled customs” have contributed significantly to “the acceptance of domestic violence” in Nepal. Some men said firmly that they must demonstrate manhood within marriage through physical discipline to correct their wives’ behaviours and to adhere to static social roles” (Pun et al. 8). Hegemonic masculinity must be expanded to understand the “role entrapment which is the function of conformity to gender expectations” related to the pressure to follow hegemonic masculinity. (Johnson and Schulman 1)

Furthermore, “in patriarchal societies women are not conceptualized as holding power, wielding power, being powerful, unless it is in relationship to aspects of the domestic or private domain which is seen as the ‘natural’ location for women” (Barriteau 29). So, a common reason behind domestic violence is family disputes with traditional expectations of men, as well as men’s attempts to express their masculinities. A man, aged 38 years old, said in the focus group discussion:

Violence exists to show manhood. As a man, I should make women work a lot...there is a strong feeling that the women's work and the men's work are separate. There is no equality [in tasks]..It is not like beating too hard till she gets hurt or wounded (Ha! Ha!)..We [only] beat when it gets too much. (4)

In fact, “masculine stereotypes include heterosexuality, strength, leadership, dominance, etc., the exhibition of such characteristics disempowers girls by creating opposite qualities to function within” (Pant). Since women are subordinated by body-reflexive practices that are typified by an ‘obligatory heterosexuality’ ingrained in the hegemonic masculinity, and men are entrapped in the patriarchal frame to follow hegemonic masculinity because of traditionally defined gender roles and societies’ expectation of them. Education, awareness, technology, and media are playing an instrumental role in transforming hegemonic masculinities to transformative masculinities. Nevertheless, some incidences or examples of hegemonic masculinities are still deeply rooted in Nepalese patriarchal societies, ingrained in people’s mindsets, and strongly grounded in everyday lived experiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

Hegemonic masculinity in Nepal is deeply ingrained in societal structures, influencing professional, media, and domestic spheres. In fields like engineering, women face barriers due to the perception that physical and technical roles are masculine, limiting their career advancement. Media representations, such as advertisements and political posters, reinforce male dominance by portraying men as powerful leaders, sidelining women from these roles. Domestic violence also reflects hegemonic masculinity, where men assert control to maintain traditional gender roles. Despite rising awareness and efforts to challenge these norms, patriarchal values continue to shape expectations of gendered behavior. Women entering male-dominated spaces are often stigmatized, and traditional masculine ideals persist in society “whether one views gender as historically rooted or biological, deviating from conventional behavior is often deemed incorrect, thereby reinforcing the existing societal norms” (qtd. in Sherma 90). To address this, the focus must shift toward redefining masculinity in non-oppressive ways and fostering gender equality, where leadership and power are shared between men and women.

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